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ESSAY | William Safire

Reading Yuli's Mind

Hello, Americans!

You are inside the mind of Yuli M. Vorontsov, at present Soviet Ambassador to France, but soon to replace Anatoly Dobrynin as the Ambassador of the U.S.S.R. to the United States.

It's all part of the silent purge. Anatoly is in Moscow trying to get the doomed Korniyenko's job as No. 2 man at the Foreign Ministry, and I wish the old boy luck, but it reminds me of the old women with their brooms following a parade in Red Square. Since Marshal Ogarkov's return, the halls of the Defense Ministry are ankle-deep in stripped-off medals.

I told the Israelis here in Paris that I would soon be speaking English instead of French, and that leak is the only thing that can stop my promotion. (That, and the tapping of my innermost thoughts by the right-wing Timesnik, who was accurate in his forecasts of Ogarkov's comeback, but who was a fool to put down a long-shot bet in his office pool against Gorbachev.)

Why am I smiling? First, I am the Soviet diplomat who has been dangling the poisoned apple of resumed relations in front of the Israelis. Mr. Peres, whose time is running out, wants to be the one who "freed Soviet Jewry," and is desperate to renew diplomatic relations, which we broke off after Israel's victory in 1967.

What Israel does not realize, of course, is the price it will have to pay for welcoming us back into the Middle East war process. As soon as our man opens up shop in Tel Aviv, we will inescapably participate in a "comprehensive" conference. I have already assured Assad and Qaddafi that they, and not Hussein and Mubarak, will control the Arab position when we are in position to offset American diplomacy in the Middle East.

Next, I am smiling because next week, the world will celebrate the greatest diplomatic victory of the Brezhnev era, and the most humiliating mistake of the Ford Presidency: the 10th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act.

I was the one, in the early 70's, who led the Soviet team that negotiated that triumph. We first gave the Americans a minor concession in Berlin, to entice you into a 33-nation conference; then we gave you what has turned out to be a 10-year joke, the "Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions," the so-called M.B.F.R., (More Better for Russia). And as a final sweetener to lead the gullible Ford to the signing table, we cheerfully agreed to a whole basket of "human rights" promises that we promptly forgot.

In return for that nonsense, we achieved the goal of our postwar generation: recognition by the West of the Soviet conquest of Eastern Europe. Our furthest border claims are now inviolable.

Next week in Helsinki, at our celebration of the anniversary of my duping of Mr. Kissinger, your Secretary Shultz will go through the usual litany of complaints about Shcharansky, Sakharov and the rest. He'll waggle his finger at us for arresting the traitors who demonstrated for peace in Red Square, and those who tried to form a committee to observe our dismissal of the meaningless part of the Final Act.

Our new Foreign Minister, Mr. Shevardnadze, who is what you call a "quick study," will not exhibit the Gromyko Stone Face, but will blaze back with an account of your own, real, violations of human rights.

What about your lynchings, your assistance to South Africa, your oppression of Nicaragua? Moral equivalency! Under the youthful leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, we will take the propaganda offensive.

The only thing that might give us pause on "basket three" is a credible threat by you to rescind your treaty approval, thus de-legitimizing our border claims.

That you will never do, because your allies would complain, and because you have a cottage industry of Congressmen and human-rights "activists" set up to get red in the face about the way we are ignoring the silly part of the treaty. They claim the Final Act gives them a "forum"; in truth, it has forced the United States to display a decadelong impotence in the face of our continuing contempt.

Finally — and I must never talk about this — I return to an embassy where, as Dobrynin's deputy in 1971, I negotiated the intelligence real estate deal of the century. Our surveillance towers occupy the high ground in Washington, D.C., but the U.S. Embassy in Moscow has no such advantages. Your President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board has been trying to find out for the last 18 months how such a spying disaster befell you in the Nixon years.

I could tell them, but I won't. On that, I won't even let you read my mind. □